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Despite 20 years of hard fought gains to achieve respect as equal participants within the formal economy, the majority of working women have made only marginal progress in obtaining sexual equality within their families. While the roles of men and women within the family have historically been distinct and different, they have generally been balanced and equitable. Now, however, the majority of women not only perform full-time jobs outside the home, but are also expected to carry primary responsibility for child care and homemaking duties. Not until husbands and wives achieve a proper balance in their household and parenting responsibilities will the struggle for sexual equality be won. (PCB)

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OVERTIME MOTHERS, UNDERTIME FATHERS

by

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Not until husbands and wives achieve a proper balance in their household and parenting responsibilities will the struggle for sexual equality be truly won. While feminists have been effectively advocating for equal work opportunities, equal pay for work of equal value and just family laws, the most critical equality issue separating the sexes has largely been ignored in public debate. Not only do the majority of Canadian women perform full time jobs outside the home but they are expected to carry primary responsibility for child care and homemaking duties during their so-called leisure hours. It is bad enough having to engage in policy battles with employers and legislators on issues of sexual inequality. When the struggle must be carried on within the intimate context of the vital relationship with one's partner, the emotional stress becomes overwhelming, except for the strongest and most committed women. For most wives and mothers the price of such conflict is too high and they quietly succumb to cultural orthodoxy, revelling in the fact that their enlightened spouse, helps with the dishes, changes the occasional diaper and baby sits one evening a week so that they can take their extension course.

Despite 20 years of hard fought gains to achieve respect as equal participants within the formal economy, the majority of working women have made only marginal progress in obtaining sexual equality within their families.

In his 1982 Child in the City Project, Wm. Michaelson and his Associates examined 247 households in which both parents worked (161 women worked full time and 86 women worked part-time).

Among the 12 activities examined, the study noted that a wife and mother who works full time outside the home puts in 128 minutes per day on housework against her working husband's 57 minutes. In the area of child care the same woman has direct contact with her children 64 minutes a day while the children's father has 22 minutes of child care contact. On the passive leisure side of the equation a working mother has 93 minutes of quiet time to herself against her husband's 131 minutes. Even in the area of sleep she loses out to her husband by 10 minutes per day.

What is most distressing about Michaelson's findings is the fact that this serious work load disparity between partners is a 20th century phenomenon which largely evolved in urban centres of the developed world. While the roles of men and women within the family have historically been distinct and different, with some noteable cultural exceptions, they have generally been balanced and equitable. Certainly in European and North American societies husbands and wives, throughout the 19th and into the early 20th centuries, had learned to share the workload associated with maintaining their families. Husbands, wives and children alike rolled up their sleeves to insure that adequate food was obtained and prepared, clothes made or purchased, babies cared for, shelter kept in good repair and warm, and sufficient money available to purchase essential goods and services. Most husbands and fathers worked close to the home, particularly in rural areas where the majority of families dwelt. Even, however, in towns and cities husbands tended to have their stores or shops close to home and in mill towns the factory was usually within a few easy blocks of home. What this geographical closeness did was to confirm the family as a more or less cohesive family unit with respect to the formal economy as well as the economy of the household. It also meant that children saw their fathers a great deal and, as they grew older, were actively engaged with their dads in the business of operating the farm or tending the shop. Under such circumstances, role modeling was relatively easy and children felt the strength and security of both their mothers and their father's presence.

During much of the 19th century the majority of married women participated actively in the formal economy, whether it be on the farm, where they undertook a wide range of chores as well as household duties, or in the shops and factories where they worked side by side with their men folk. It was only the relatively small merchant and professional class that enjoyed the luxury and social status of having their wives stay home and care for the children as well as coordinate household duties with the help of their servants. Towards the latter part of the 19th century, the combination of improved mechanization and the introduction of trade unions allowed for significantly increased wages and a decrease in the number of workers required for manufacturing.

Labourers now had the means to allow their wives to stay home and care for the children. In addition the requirement for a reduced labour force quite conveniently established the circumstances for the development of a new lower middle class. Having one's wife at home rapidly became a tangible symbol of the family's new social status.

At the same time the movement of families from rural areas, where hardship was a way of life, to towns and cities where more money could be earned in shorter hours and under less strenuous conditions, began to occur. Thus it was that sexual role division, between the partner working in the formal economy and the partner managing the informal or household economy, began to occur. With this radical shift in duties, came the unfortunate diminishing of father's role as an active and equal parent as well as the creation of serious inbalance in the economic role between husbands and wives. For the first time in western history wives of labourers and, to some degree, farmers, were excluded from the important role of maintaining the formal economic viability of the family. This unique historical development is at the root of the current dilemma facing husbands and wives in 1985. Since the mid 60's married women of all social classes have been re-entering the work force for a variety of both personal and economic reasons. This sudden shift should be viewed as a return to the historical norm, a situation which would be completely understood by our great great grandparents but must come as a considerable shock to most of our parents and grandparents. With the return to more normal working conditions, however, men and women must quickly address the issue of equitable housework and parenting responsibilities. While "supermoms" make good copy in our magazines, they represent a mythological breed of women that do little but increase female guilt and promote feelings of gross inadequacy. Besides, supermoms cannot help but be married to unenlightened cultural dinosaurs from the Ozzie and Harriet era. The role models which are critical to our social adjustment, and the ones which popular journalism should be featuring, are those of men and women who have successfully achieved the critical balance; mums who do their work well, look after their children

adequately and have the time to relax and pursue revitalizing personal interests, and dads who support their families, parent their children (not baby-sit), and spontaneously tackle housework chores.

What is needed to begin redressing inequities in household and parenting workloads are a few simple yet highly practical exercises. These should only be undertaken, however, once it has been acknowledged that a significant imbalance in household labour does exist and that the correction of this imbalance will enhance the family's overall functioning. Trying to drag a reluctant spouse through these changes is not only emotionally exhausting but will inevitably lead to overt or subtle forms of sabotage and conflict. As one young woman in a workshop I conducted recently, put it. "He seems willing to help but I find myself having to constantly give directions and when he completes the task the results are usually a disaster. Frankly it's a lot easier for me to do things myself if I want them done well." And so hubby goes back to watching Monday Night Football after doing the token dishes, while his wife does the laundry and irons the shirts.

A good start at the redistribution of workloads is the scheduling of dinner preparation and clean-up activities among all family members including children, as young as 8 or 9 years of age (below this age they require close supervision). Each member of a family of 4 therefore undertakes the cooking of 2 meals per week, sets the table twice and cleans up twice with one night free. While you may not eat gourmet quality cooking at the outset, before long each individual begins taking some pride in his or her cooking. In my own family, my son began cooking out of Julia Child by the time he was 10 years of age, and is now the best chef in the family.

Scheduling regular housework blitzes involving all family members is also a good method of insuring equitable homework distribution. Set the stove timer for one half hour. At the end of that period a family of 4 will have put in two man/woman hours of concentrated cleaning and tidying, enough time to restore order from chaos in most 6 or 7 room houses.

Major tasks such as shopping, laundry, garbage collection, lawn cutting, etc. can be assigned to one or more members of the household according to preference The least desirable tasks can be shared around so that no one person gets a dirty task all the time. Here again careful attention can be given to the amount and complexity of labour involved in the routine task and the time it takes to complete the task.

To insure that these exercises are working and that no one is getting an unreasonable share of housework duties, it is helpful to hold a family meeting at least once a week. At that time new ideas can be introduced, concerns expressed and time tables established for the upcoming week. Such sessions naturally involve the children as they are members of the family and should learn early to shoulder home management responsibility as did their ancestral grandparents when they were children.

The above simple proposals are examples of the kinds of natural changes that can be done to insure equitable distribution of labour within the family. At the same time the involvement of children and teens prepares the way for greater sexual equality in the next generation. While today's young men, in particular, are being called up to acquire new skills and greater sexual sensitivity at a rather late stage in their development, the way is clear to inculcate these natural skills and values in young boys and teens. When our youngest generation reaches adulthood and enters married life, it is to be hoped that they will assume the values of sexual equality with respect to household management and parenting as a matter of course. This is the best way of eliminating the sexual power struggle which pervades the maladaptive behaviour dominating too many contemporary marriages.

It is unfortunate that the lessons of sexual equality within marriage and family life, have been so difficult to learn. There is little doubt that sexual inequality within marriage has been one of the principal conflicts which has led to a national divorce rate in Canada of 40%. During the last 20 years we have experienced a turbulent social revolution as a result of our inability to respond with human sensitivity and social justice to the cultural

and economic changes which were upon us. In self defence males, in particular, attempted to revert to the old order, oblivious to the fact that the traditional sexual role differentiation they sought was a cultural anomaly, a mere blip in the social history of family life throughout the world. Women, on the other hand, sought to redress social injustice by attacking institutions outside the family, while floundering with the supermom role and seething with guilt and anger over the loss of marital and familial solidarity. Sadly, the pages of social history are filled with martyrs and heroes who struggled valiantly to correct human injustice while failing miserably in their personal lives to live by the values they hoped to implant in society. Sexual equality within the family can, and indeed must, be achieved if we are to correct the blatant sexual inequalities which exist under the laws, legislation, and practices of the land. Until we men accept the true meaning of marital partnership, however, we are unlikely to respond with heart and enthusiasm to the employment and family law reforms which our wives and daughters deserve as equal members of society. It is in all our best interests to succeed in this undertaking as the consequences of failure are, as we have observed, terribly damaging to ourselves and our children. Fortunately the solutions are relatively simple and can do little lasting damage to the male ego.

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